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AUTHOR Roberts, Dianne; Power, Kerith
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ABSTRACT

This interview with Dianne Roberts, director of the Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool in Armidale, New South Wales (Australia), explores research issues, leadership styles, and how decision making and responsibilities are handled at Minimbah. Incoming researchers must show how research will benefit the community under study, how they will work in collaboration with the people they will be researching, and how the research will contribute funds to help support Minimbah's programs. A longitudinal study of Aboriginal children at Minimbah demonstrates the advantages of this approach. Working with parents turned the research into a united community venture. Videotapes of the children were viewed by the community, and parents commented and offered conclusions. The community ended up saying how much the research benefitted the community and their children. Leadership functions at Minimbah are spread throughout the organization. Although the typical hierarchy is present within the management committee and staffing structure, individual staff members find freedom to speak and act and a measure of responsibility incorporated into each job description. Staff members have control over the budget for their own functions, and each staff member has a turn of planning and directing the programs, setting up the environment, maintaining the room, or supervising the outdoor program. This approach enables individuals to be powerful in the preschool. (TD)

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Making Research Count at Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool, Armidale NSW

By

D. Roberts and Kerith Power

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D.Roberts and Kerith Power.

This section was selected from an interview conducted with Dianne Roberts by Kerith Power on 25/11/98, as part of a research project on successful Indigenous leadership in early childhood settings. During the remainder of this interview Dianne identified 'Learning to be Literate', a study conducted by Dr Myra Dunn from 1990 to the present, which measured Minimbah children's literacy skills at four years old, at nine years old and at twelve, to identify early indicators of literacy success in later schooling; and to the present study of leadership, under way in a time of change and expansion for the Preschool into Primary schooling (Power, K. and Roberts, D, 1998) 'Minimbah: Effective Aboriginal Leadership in an Early Childhood Setting: Making Research Count'.
K: Dianne, I just wanted to ask you how Minimbah has used research projects to benefit the children and the staff over the years that you've been in charge.

D: First of all, I wanted people who came in to do research had to show me how it was going to benefit the community which was going to be researched; then they had to talk about how they would work in collaboration with the people they were researching, then also how the research was going to contribute funds to help support Minimbah's programs along the way, because it's important that if there is identification of needs within Minimbah we need to be able to access funds to make this a Best Practice facility.

So I always spoke to researchers about that.

We have had two very well known people: first of all Professor Anne Katrin Eckermann, who has worked tirelessly doing research within Aboriginal communities

with Aboriginal people as well as within the wider context of the wider community. We sat down and discussed how the research would benefit the community in which we were going to be researching, the people within that community and also what advantages and what would happen in the overall projected vision of the centre that we're working in now. It was something that was always planned out and talked about, discussed and see how beneficial it was going to do that.

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Long term beneficial was no. 1, identify problems, or weakness within our project that we can work towards making it a better practice- things, for example, - how we work and how we communicate with children. This project [A-K Eckermann and G.Kaplan, A Longitudinal Study of Aboriginal Children at Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool, 1992, 1993, 1994] was based on behaviour 'problems'- not behaviour problems, because Professor Eckermann believes that if we identify negativity within a program then it often pulls apart what we're aiming to do, so what she always identifies is the strength of the child or the community in which you're working. Then you get a much better result. What I've seen from those practices is that if a teacher who is working with Aboriginal kids, we identify how they present themselves in front of the classroom. At the time I was lucky to have a non-Aboriginal teacher and also an Aboriginal teacher who's a qualified child care worker.

It gave us advantages right across the board because parents were able to see their little darlings in action ; we benefited from that because we work in collaboration with parents as well as in our community of Minimbah. When we brought the parents together to look at just the raw [video] tapes, then there was lots of laughing. We invited them along and gave them a meal and a lot of parents spoke to us and communicated back to us: 'Well, I used to do that, so what is so different you videotaping these children doing these things, I think I was even worse!'

Also it showed up as a united community venture. Everybody was laughing at what their kids were doing, enjoying the lovely things they got from it, talking to someone, especially like Anne, who people often look at as coming in to say 'What information do you want now?'. By doing it this way, in collaboration, they become part of the process.

K So did people in the preschool and in the community change what they did with their children as a result of this project, or was it just this consciousness that their kids were behaving typically and it wasn't necessarily a problem?

D They just said 'well, it's amazing, ' it highlighted to them what their parents did about it, or their nans and pops, to overcome what they thought was bad behaviour.

What I got from that was to say even though society has changed so much, we can still see the connection, still connecting with each other, but basically fitting in to

where we're at in our thinking and in our changes in society.

The research, worked in collaboration, was done by Aboriginal people, it became developing a skill for that person, I know has gone on to bigger and better things and that's what I often highlight to research that comes in to Minimbah.

The other thing was most importantly, how we can identify where we can go next. I used it then later on as part of my teachers' professional development time. They were then able to identify 'I would have done that differently if I was doing that' and at the same time they screamed and laughed at the things they did do and they all became as a group. 'I think I should have done that differently because I can see it now' without putting the other person down.

That's a great resource and I've still got those tapes. We have made that agreement at the start, that a contract must be written up, that all videotaping, all information that has been gathered, that the parents would look at it if we're going to videotape their child and we must have that at all times as property of Minimbah. It can be used by the researchers, all the time back and forth like that. At any time staff could say 'We don't want that used'.

The video [camera] was on constantly through the day for twelve months. We could identify the developmental level of the children.

I identified a different style of interaction by the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers [more touching and physical warmth and encouragement by the Aboriginal teachers]. I didn't highlight that it was non-Aboriginal teachers, I just went on the style of teaching.

K So you could pick out what works and what doesn't work with the children.

D We edited the tape and then invited parents and the community to lunch, We didn't tell them our conclusions, we allowed them to comment and make their own.

K So, basically, you turned the whole community into researchers.

D The whole community was saying how much the research benefited the community and our children instead of saying we're fed up with being researched any

more.

K Actually, someone on your staff asked me that question about my project with you. She said 'If I answer your questions, is it going to get Minimbah more funding?'

D We need to be able to ask these questions, that's where the Government is moving, we have to be more accountable and we have been accountable.

Introduction to the leadership project- Kerith Power.

This research is a small project attempting to document and analyse how Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool's Director Dianne Roberts, and her staff construct themselves and each other as Indigenous leaders and educators, and how they regard their success in providing a culturally appropriate early childhood setting which in turn will lead to success for Indigenous children in mainstream education.

I recognise that the terms 'leadership', 'culturally appropriate' and ' success' in themselves are problematic and complex, but exploring these complexities is not possible in this talk.

Previous research at Minimbah including that completed by Myra Dunn (1998) shows literacy outcomes for the children which support the particular storyline of success in mainstream education. Minimbah is successful in many other ways which are also outside the scope of this paper.

On 3/11/98 I presented excerpts from audiotaped interviews with Dianne and her staff to illustrate one aspect of the storylines of leadership at Minimbah, that is, that leadership functions are spread throughout the organisation. Individuals on the staff variously take up or resist this view.

I also stated that although on the surface the leadership in this preschool seems similar to mainstream early childhood settings, there seem to be differences that could possibly be attributed to its Aboriginal perspectives. Dianne herself avoids the trap of 'Aboriginalism' by insisting that every setting is different and that what works at Minimbah may not apply elsewhere. Again, there is a range within the staff on taking up or negating this storyline of difference through Aboriginality. One staff member, at least, resists the idea of difference and states that she doesn't think Minimbah is much different from any other preschool.

A colleague asked me whether Dianne Roberts' language about leadership could constitute Minimbah as a site of 'resistance'. I did not see Dianne's attitude as one of resistance because I interpreted the term in a dualistic way: I thought it meant having an attitude of confrontation and refusal against a dominant power structure. I then looked at two aspects of 'resistance' as defined by Foucault, that is: that resistance is inherent in power relations and that it is characterised as 'mobile and transitory' rather than fixed and ongoing (McHoul and Grace, 1997, pp 84-86).

When Dianne speaks about her leadership, one of the themes is her desire to invert the 'hierarchical system' within Minimbah. This language is similar to a socially critical emancipatory educational discourse but does not, I believe, represent a fixed resistance to a fixed authority. In material terms the hierarchical system is there within the management committee and staffing structure, which echoes that of any community-based preschool in NSW. However in the spaces of this hierarchy individuals on the staff find freedom to speak and act, at different times taking up, skewing and refusing storylines of Aboriginality, of education and success. Similarly, Dianne positions herself in many different ways: sometimes in an emancipatory fashion as an advocate, sometimes as an adult educator and sometimes as an 'Aunty' or elder. Sometimes she defers to staff who know more about a particular situation because of their kinship connections. Rarely, inside Minimbah, she takes up the legal/rational role of Director, depending on her judgement of the needs of the situation and, importantly, depending on to whom she is speaking. I believe this way of operating corresponds to the notion of 'mobile and transitory' points of resistance within a power dynamic . I think it enables individuals to be powerful in the preschool and this is indicated in their language. The same staff member who thinks Minimbah is like other preschools

thinks that Dianne's leadership is special :' It's the freedom of speech' (Interview, 9/9/98).

In speaking of the preschool's relationship to the wider society, one of the drawings Dianne frequently makes is a small circle representing, at times, Aboriginal people and organisations and at other times, Minimbah. Accompanying this is a large circle representing 'the mainstream'. Sometimes Minimbah and Aboriginal organisations are linked to the mainstream by arrows and sometimes the smaller circle is enclosed within the larger one. I think these diagrams represent shifting notions of the power relations between Minimbah and what Dianne calls the 'mainstream'. She uses these diagrams to represent her strategies of working in partnership and sometimes of manoevring around and past the resistances she finds in both the 'mainstream' and in Aboriginal circles.She does not espouse direct opposition as a strategy and in many situations I have observed her refusing to take it up. However this does not preclude questioning the structures and processes of mainstream organisations which control Minimbah's funding, or exercising strategic power through networks to gain support.

When they are asked about their own exercise of leadership within the preschool, staff will often deny that they exercise any: some see leadership as 'bossing others around'. Dianne has incorporated into each job description a measure of responsibility, for instance, every staff member has control over the budget for the function they play, as teacher, cook, bus driver or cleaner. Some of what I would call 'leadership' functions are thus regarded by staff members as a normal part of the job where they might refuse to take on others, like directing other staff. Dianne deals wth this diversity by circulating what I would call leadership roles in the classroom: every face to face staff member, whether trained or not, has a turn of planning and directing the program, setting up the environment , maintaining the room or supervising the outdoor program. A similar philosophy governs her allocation of administrative functions between the clerical staff and ancillary staff. All have freedom to exercise some choices within their role and to question the role itself. Responsibility and therefore power is shared, even if the people who are doing this don't call it 'leadership'. Some of the individual stories about this, for example, position Dianne as being ' too soft ' (staff interview, 9/9/98) .

In this analysis of a small collection of data in light of a small part of post-structuralist theory, I hope I have shown that working from assumptions of complexity, fluidity and shifting perspectives in an analysis of power relations at Minimbah proved to be a useful tool in representing a few of the many voices within the preschool having a part in constituting Minimbah's leadership.

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